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REALITY CHECK
THE POLITICS OF MISTRUST

Going to the Grass Roots to Nurture a Cure

Last in a series

By David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Clinton and Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), his possible campaign opponent, don't agree on much these days. But they both feel the cynicism of a nation that has become much more distrustful of its government and its politicians. And a cure eludes them.

Clinton, in an Oval Office interview, recalled that when he worked as a Capitol Hill intern during the Vietnam debates in the late 1960s and when he ran for the House in the Watergate election of 1974, people wanted policies or leaders changed, "but they didn't think there was anything wrong with America" or its governing institutions.
Now, he said, "there's a much more

pervasive loss of trust in the country, not just in political institutions but in the way Americans feel about each other."

Dole, interviewed between campaign stops in New Hampshire, remembered "a lot of tough questions, a lot of cynicism" during his first House race in 1960, but said "it's moved quite a lot since that time . . . maybe not a massive change, but certainly a marked change. . . . There's a wall of cynicism, and it's hard to break down."

Clinton, Dole and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) were among two dozen public officials asked to discuss the public opinion surveys that have run this past week in The Washington Post, depicting the loss of social trust among Americans and the dramatic decline in confidence in the integrity of government and politicians. They were asked what they think caused this loss of trust, how

they attempt to cope with it in their jobs and whether they think it can be overcome.

Some were not impressed with the findings. Gingrich, who rode to power in 1994 on what many interpreted as a massive protest against the Washington political establishment, put on his history professor's cap and declared, "This country's always been skeptical of power and has always cherished the right to beat up its leaders, including [George] Washington. . . . The period from 1940 to 1965 was one of the most ordered periods in American history," a period of great international challenge but also of rapid and widely shared economic growth. "We are now back in the more normally American style, which is high levels of chaos with brief moments of coherence."

Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.), who rarely agrees with Gingrich on

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policy, concurred on this question. "I don't know that they have lost more trust than they had 15 years ago," Daschle said. "I think there's always been a skepticism in the West about government. It's a healthy skepticism in many respects."

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), a political scientist by trade, said it is important to remember that the Founders believed "mistrust is the normal condition . . . and its absence is revelatory and rare. Our Constitution from the beginning assumed distrust of government, and of each other."

But the vast majority of those interviewed found the public cynicism both severe in intensity and stronger than it once was. Here's retiring Republican Sen. Alan K. Simpson's vivid description of the way his Wyoming constituents view Washington, D.C.: "They think there's something very evil going on out here, something cheap, where everybody is selling their soul. They think we cheat and steal and whore around. They think everything has gone to hell and that we feather our own nests and take care of ourselves and not them."

Cleveland Mayor Mike White (D) decided at the age of 14 that he wanted one day to lead his city, inspired by the example of the Kennedy brothers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Carl Stokes, the first black elected mayor. But from 1966 to today, White said, "we have witnessed a dehumanization of our society that is as stark as the change from Freedom Riders to drive-by shootings."

Second-generation politicians such as former Senate majority leader Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.) and New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman (R) contrasted the respect their parents received with the derision today's officeholders encounter.

"When I was a kid," said House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.), "everybody joked about politicians, as Mark Twain and Will Rogers had done, but there was an underlying respect for public service and for government and political life. People looked up to their mayor . . . and certainly to the president. That's all eroded."

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Tex.), who ousted a Democratic incumbent to win her seat in 1994, said she has

found "an overall disgust" among constituents, an unfocused anger that makes them "bristle at any touch."

"You have to be accessible to people, not let them feel that once they elect you they never see you again," Dole said in an interview. "I'm talking about real people, not the people on Wall Street, the people at the top of the heap. I know Clinton does a lot of it. He goes to these town meetings. But it's tough when you're president, because it turns into a photo op."

Three days later, Clinton remarked that he had been forced to abandon his town meetings—"something that really gave people a feeling that they were connected"—because of the media. Driven by the imperative to find something that fit their definition of news, reporters inevitably would pick up "one mistake or one moment of conflict" and make that the story 100 million people saw, Clinton said. "The people who cover me have to make news every day," he said, "but it undermines my ability to conduct that kind of dialogue."

So the search for a cure goes on.

A Daunting Task

Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith (R) is one politician who thinks the public "has a right" to be ticked off at government. "You can get whatever you want on a hamburger at Wendy's," he said, "but you can't get it from government."

Goldsmith is part of a young generation of consumer-oriented public offi-

cials, with high popularity at home. But even he conceded that "changing the culture" of alienation and distrust among neighbors and between citizens and city hall is a daunting task.

When it comes to the cynicism about Washington, some of the Republicans who have been at the heart of the "revolution" believe it is out of hand. House Majority Leader Richard K. Arney (R-Tex.), principal author of the 1994 "Contract With America," said, "I would be willing to bet that we are, from an ethical or moral or legal point of view, cleaner than Congress was a generation ago. But there's been enough rhetoric about the corrupt Congress—we're all guilty of it, and I regret what I'm sure is the part

I've had in it—that we've reinforced the myth that they're all a bunch of crooks up here."

The survey research suggested strongly that distrust of politicians reflects a broader loss of reliance on

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— SEN. ROBERT J. DOLE

each other, a civic breakdown, in which divorce, crime and economic anxiety all played roles. Clinton agreed.

"People wonder whether there are social institutions, whether it's government or anything else, that they can always depend on, always feel a part of," he said. "Trust tends to erode if there aren't rules."

This analysis is shared—with different emphases—across party lines. Moynihan and Arney focused on the breakdown of family ties. Gephardt argued that the "frustration of people trying to get in the middle class" is at the heart of the problem, creating "tremendous anxiety" that translates easily into anger with government.

Clinton also said the sense of individual vulnerability is heightened by the media. "The aggregate impact of television is to have people be more isolated and to interrupt our sustained engagement with others," he said, a view endorsed by others.

Freshman Rep. David M. McIntosh (R-Ind.) argued that the welfare system has served as a wedge between neighbors, with the working family and the family that can't find work becoming "resentful of each other." Housing and Urban Development

Secretary Henry Cisneros agreed that whether it is "rich Wall Street types or welfare mothers," many Americans are convinced "somebody is ripping them off," and are mad that government doesn't stop it.

A number of those interviewed said public distemper is a larger force in the distrust of government than specific actions by politicians. Said former Connecticut governor and senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr., a private businessman and political independent: "We're spoiled, very spoiled. We expect an instant miracle solution to every problem we have, without much of a contribution from ourselves. Democracy requires people to grasp the facts, and too often they don't. It requires them to accept sacrifice, and too often they won't."

Gingrich offered a sharp dissent. "I don't find nearly as much cynicism in the public as I do in the elites," he said. "It seems to me that if you have the courage to stick to your convictions, the American people will repay you, whether it's FDR or [Ronald] Reagan. It's remarkable what the American people will rally to if you have the nerve to ask them. But you have to stick to it. . . . If you flinch, you're dead."

Leading by Division

Former Senate Democratic leader George S. Mitchell of Maine spoke for most of those interviewed when he combined those two views: Society has bred a distemper in politics and politics has increased the frustration among voters.

"Politicians will use the tools that are readily available to advance themselves," Mitchell said. "With the rise of distrust, it has become easier to lead people by dividing them" than by finding areas of agreement.

The president also pointed to "negative campaigns and wedge issues" as ways in which politics has fed public cynicism. "These tactics may result in success for a particular candidate," he said, "but the aggregate impact is to make people feel more disengaged from the process and less involved." Mitchell's former colleague, Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine), who will join him in retirement at the end of this year, put part of the blame on those in his party "who run against government and say government is your enemy. . . . They run against the very institution in which they are going to serve."

"At some point you've got to govern," said former Senate GOP leader

Baker. "You've got to accommodate differing points of view."

Not surprisingly, some Republican newcomers see it differently. "There's a very large potential danger for us in the Republican majority," said freshman McIntosh, "if we fail to keep the promises." Public cynicism, he said, has been fed by years of politicians promising "smaller government and welfare reform . . . and yet keeping a large welfare state."

Arney too argued that big government has hurt itself by creating "this

incredible rising expectation that whatever the problem, government can solve it. . . . Now people are saying, 'I've seen your government programs. They're not going to work. Leave me alone.' "

Even some Democrats agree that overpromising has fed public cynicism.

The crime issue offers an example, Mitchell said. "The fear of crime has had a pervasive effect," he said, "and it has focused on the federal government, even though the federal government has very little to do with the violent crime people are concerned about. National figures have claimed that if they were elected, they could do something about it. They haven't. So Washington gets blamed."

Exaggerating the Negative

More bipartisan agreement: The media bear a special responsibility for the distrust of government.

It was stated this way by retiring Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.): "The media tend to emphasize and encourage conflict, when there is much more consensus in the society. It exaggerates the sensational. Complexity is reduced to a sound bite. There is not enough context to journalism. . . .

And there is an exaggeration of the negative. America is not as bad as it looks on the evening news."

Dole noted that in addition to the regular weekly "waste in government" pieces on the network news, "you've got people on the right and the left with their radio talk shows—the Limbaughs and the liberals—and they know that if they're going to be effective, they have to go after somebody. There's got to be an enemy out there. It's got to be the government, or Bob Dole, or Bill Clinton, or somebody."

The larger point, the president

said, is that even though "the public gets mad at you [the press], they still believe you that there's something wrong with politics and politicians. So they not only lose confidence in you, they lose confidence in us at the same time."

This is not just a headache for Washington politicians. Seattle Mayor Norman Rice (D) said his local media "tend to exploit the problem, not explain the problem." And Gov. Whitman complained that in New Jersey, "when you put forward an idea, there's no sense in the media that this may be imperfect, but it is worth considering. . . . Somebody has to lose for somebody to win."

As if all this were not enough, Rep. Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.), the veteran conservative who has announced retirement plans, pointed to another aspect of the information explosion. "If you are at all a political activist," he said, "you could be getting dozens of mailings a week from various groups, looking to raise money, who paint the issues in the worst possible way. The only way that direct mail works is to paint things in the starkest terms. It's a very narrow picture of reality and it undermines our ability to have a responsible public debate."

Closest to Citizens

So, how do you govern in an environment of pervasive distrust?

The people who answer that question most confidently are those operating closest to this disaffected citizenry: the mayors.

Rudolph W. Giuliani, the Republican mayor of the famously cynical city of New York, said, "It's easier to be mayor, because I can do things that connect to people. . . . I had a town meeting last week, where I knew there were going to be six different groups wanting stop signs in their neighborhoods. Usually, it takes 2,000 years. I brought the signs with me."

Cleveland's Mayor White bypassed the City Council and went directly to the citizens to rally support for a property tax assessment to pay for additional police. It passed, he said, because he allowed neighborhood groups to decide how the new cops would be deployed. A battle with municipal unions over his insistence on competitive bidding for street repairs and other jobs "had my council all up in arms," he recalled. "I told the council president, 'You don't know who you work for. These 500,000 people are your customers. You don't work

for the unions. You don't work for the media. You work for them.' I won the fight."

"Bottom-up" policy-making also is the solution many governors said they have used. Faced with the need for long-term planning to deal with a projected doubling of population in the next 50 years, Colorado Gov. Roy Romer (D) got 200 communities to

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